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Wrestling with Democracy: Voting Systems as Politics in the Twentieth-Century West

Dennis Pilon

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Interest in electoral system change, long an under-researched topic in political science, has been stimulated by the changes since 1993 in three consolidated Western democracies, Japan, New Zealand and Italy (twice, with a third change currently under debate), as well as a renewed interest in electoral systems in the new democracies of Eastern Europe and the third world. Electoral systems have long been prime examples of the stickiness of institutions, and these reforms, as Dennis Pilon suggests, caught many political scientists unawares. They still constitute a very small number of cases on which to base any more general conclusions.

In *Wrestling with Democracy*, Pilon has therefore broadened his scope to include electoral system changes in Western countries since the struggles to introduce democracy in the late nineteenth century. He has furthermore eschewed both the search for “covering laws” and cultural explanations in favour of a more contextualized approach to the cases which takes account of the differences in national situations and actors’ motives and perceptions (“critical institutionalism”). More specifically, he sees debates and struggles over the choice of electoral system as a part of the struggle to establish and define democracy, in which the working class and leftist parties have been the primary actors. He stresses that class struggle, rather than other factors, such as the desire to represent minorities or to facilitate stable governments or alternation in power, accounts for electoral system change.

Pilon’s intuition here is surely correct. By maintaining that electoral system change can be understood only as part of a broader dynamic, he commits himself to a detailed and context-sensitive investigation of specific changes, and only after these contextual accounts does he attempt some generalizations. In the end, those he formulates are not too different from those of a familiar strand of previous scholarship: proportional representation has, by and large though not always, been adopted in order to shape democracy so as to limit the impact of the rise of the working class and hence protect the capitalist order.

The body of the book is devoted to the examination of electoral system changes in five distinct periods. In the nineteenth century, in the few instances where PR was introduced (Belgium and several German states), it was to blunt the effect of the extension of the suffrage to all adult males. In the next period (1900–1918), the same sorts of reasons led to its adoption in Sweden, Finland and Denmark, while in those countries where the left was less threatening, majority or plurality systems were generally retained. The interwar period was marked by a shift to PR in several countries in the aftermath of World War I, which Pilon again attributes to the rise of the left and the conservative reaction to it. After this brief interlude, interest in electoral system reform waned. In the Cold War period, after favouring PR in Europe immediately after World War II, the US and its allies tended to support majoritarian solutions, expecting that they would ease the task of governing for conservative, pro-Western parties.

The final period (1970–2000) Pilon calls “neoliberal democratic realignment.” Here he demonstrates the variety of situations that can arise and the different ways in which electoral reform can become part of the political struggle. In Italy and Japan, the adoption of less proportional systems can be seen as part of an attempt to dislodge established governing parties that protected their own clienteles and opposed market-oriented reforms, though Pilon seeks to assert a role for left parties’ strategic calculations as well. In New Zealand, on the other hand, the surprising shift to PR was in reaction to a drastic neoliberal

program implemented by a government that had not campaigned on it but could not be stopped because the majoritarian institutions provided no checks or veto points. France's short-lived experiment with PR in the 1980s is interpreted as a way of permitting the ruling Socialists to jettison their Communist allies and reach out to the centrist parties—again, in the context of Mitterrand's "U-turn" in which he shifted towards more neoliberal policies. Given the centrality of left-wing parties in Pilon's explanation, he concludes by speculating that with the disappearance of the traditional working-class party, electoral system reforms in the twenty-first century may have quite different explanations.

Pilon's starting point, that electoral system change is not an *explanandum* in its own right but part of much larger processes, puts this study on much firmer ground than most. And his conclusions are based on extensive empirical material ranging over many democratic systems and many eras. These merits are enough to commend the book to all who are interested in the topic, and indeed to those interested in the broader dynamic of democratization over the past 125 or more years. But it also provides a good basis for further, more detailed studies. By requiring contextualized explanations Pilon has also set himself a very demanding task: to develop an in-depth understanding of the politics of these many systems and eras. It is virtually impossible to communicate this understanding in a single book, and inevitably there are a few instances where an area specialist would like to see a further explanation of Pilon's judgment about particular situations or actors.

Because of the broad scope, his decision to rely solely on secondary sources is understandable (there are also no tables or graphs, and little discussion of the details of electoral laws). Pilon also points to future research directions: there remains room for a fuller investigation of the motives of the actors, which he indeed considers central to his explanatory approach, along with the context in which they operate; the interaction of structure and agency and the role of contingency is a central theme of the book. The effects of electoral system changes are often surprising and unexpected, and it would be interesting to look in more depth into the actors' own perceptions of the properties of the different systems at different times. It may seem paradoxical, for instance, that while PR was typically introduced to limit the gains of the left, Iversen and Soskice ("Electoral Institutions and the Politics of Coalitions," *American Political Science Review*, 100 (2): 165–81, 2006) have recently shown that PR is strongly correlated with left-of-centre governments and more generous welfare states, independently of the ideological centre of gravity of the party system. This attention to the political actors' mind sets will require a more detailed focus on a few cases and primary research.

While broad structural changes, such as the growth of the working class or the advance of neoliberalism, provide much of the context for the developments Dennis Pilon studies, actors have, as he demonstrates, perceived and responded to them in different ways. His book provides a crucial point of reference for future studies on electoral systems and electoral system change.

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Lucien Bouchard. Le pragmatisme politique

Jean-François Caron
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Quiconque désire en apprendre plus sur la vie de Lucien Bouchard, sur les détails de son parcours politique, sera déçu par le récent ouvrage de Jean-François Caron, *Lucien*